

Sign of the Coming Kingdom

a sermon preached on the

24th Sunday after Pentecost

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lection: Daniel 12:1-3, Psalm 16, Mark 13:1-11

The gospels theme at the end of the liturgical year foregrounds the age-old insoluble question: When will God's work of salvation, already a reality in the death and resurrection of Christ, be complete? What will being 'complete' look like? How long will this take? What will be the sign? These are the questions which are never far beneath the surface, no matter how superficially we may live, no matter how hard we may attempt to suppress them – erupting to the surface, like a volcano, at times like death, suffering, and tragedy.

The early church was obviously convinced that this completion would be accomplished in their life time, as the words Mark puts on Jesus' lips clearly indicate: "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." ¹ St Paul, writing around 20 years before the evangelist we call Mark, was probably the first to articulate this bold and firm conviction. ² Jesus' incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, they were convinced, had ushered in the new creation. The new creation was already an accomplished reality. The kingdom had come. Death had lost its sting. ³

Yet it was perfectly obvious to all that human existence continued to be marked by suffering, and death. So how could the Kingdom have been established, and yet suffering continue to be a reality? The answer which the early church developed, a pragmatic solution to a profound spiritual problem, was the 'second coming', when what had been commenced would be brought to completion. Of course, while this 'solution' solved one problem, it simply raised many others, which continue to bedevil Christian faith. Chapter 13 of Mark's gospel, the culmination of Tuesday in Holy Week, according to Mark, contains ample evidence of some of those problems which the early church had to deal with. In response to the disciples' question about the signs and the timing of the end, Jesus issues a series of stern warnings about even looking for signs, as well as an absolute prohibition against predictions of the timing: "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am!' and they will lead many astray." ⁴ "If anyone says to you at that time, 'Look! Here is the Messiah' or 'Look! There he is!' – do not believe it." ⁵ But this hardly settled the matter, and the church's response to this problem is a vast, tidal wave of theological dispute.

What I have come to see is that this effort, laudable for its genuineness, and because the wrestling is necessary, has, albeit inadvertently, created a great spiritual stumbling block – making the ordaining of women bishops and gays look like a children's tea party. Indeed in our time it may prove to be the greatest spiritual scandal, an insurmountable impediment to the church's mission. Because this preoccupation has promoted two disastrous consequences - the fixation with a merely historical Incarnation; and the accompanying fixation with a merely external Incarnation.

Vast energies have been expended defending the singularity of the historical Incarnation, the utter unrepeatable, once-and-for-allness of the Jesus event which broke into history in the first century of the Common Era. Unlike our apparently-mistaken early church forebears, we can no longer sensibly entertain the idea that the 'second coming', as they envisaged it, can occur in our life time. Thus, this inevitably leaves us instead looking backwards to the life, death, and resurrection of the historical Christ – or forwards to an

¹ Mark 13:30

² 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17

³ 1 Corinthians 15:55

⁴ Mark 13:5-6

⁵ Mark 13:21

infinitely-distant future, obsessed with an 'after life'. Indeed, the church has enthusiastically exterminated anyone whose teaching seemed to threaten the absolute singularity of Incarnation. What makes this a spiritual disaster is that Incarnation, under this constraint, can only be possible once in all of human history.

The second tragedy follows from the first. The insistence on this singularity ensures that Incarnation remains external to humans. Christ's coming is not something in which we actually participate. Christ's 'second coming', the completion, also cannot be something in which we actually participate. From the Divine point of view, this is impossible by virtue of the fact that the Divine is, by definition, utterly Other. From the human point of view, the church's especially successful, and voluminous, teachings on human sinfulness have cemented the impossibility of real and meaningful participation with Christ. Thus, the task of the disciple of Christ has been to somehow imitate Christ, yet with the obvious disadvantage of not actually being like Christ, not really. How can you be like Superman, if you are in fact fundamentally different in substance from Superman? An impossible task, of course, which has spawned all manner of 'christian' neuroses, leading to distorted, sadistic and masochistic behaviours and 'missionary' spiritual abuse. The modern person quite rightly revolts against all this.

However, though this has been the stance of what is triumphally and imperialistically called orthodoxy, this historicising and externalising has never been the only voice – neither in Scripture, nor in the witness of a great many saints of the church. Indeed, from the outset the gospels themselves already contain the counter-position and antidote: "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is inside you."⁶ Perhaps the early church's confidence about the reality of the kingdom coming in their lifetime was not entirely misplaced after all – but only the mistake of limiting the second coming according to the calendar, and the mistake of limiting the second coming to a purely external phenomena.

So perhaps the more accurate conclusion to draw out of the fact that the second coming did not occur in their lifetime is that because of these two limitations to their vision they were unable to see what was actually right in front of them: Incarnation is not a singular historical event; Incarnation is not a phenomena external to humankind. Or to put these two conclusions positively: Incarnation is an event unbounded by time and geography; Incarnation is a spiritual reality which is innate to, and necessary to, human life.

This adjustment in vision makes it possible to truly participate, with Christ, in the completion of human life, of all life. So to ask questions like 'When will salvation be complete?' 'What will be the sign?' is to look neither merely to history nor merely elsewhere. Rather, the question that matters is the question which finds a home within ourselves, within every human heart and flesh. This is the true *εὐαγγέλιον* *evangellion* – the kingdom of God is coming to birth, and to completion, in all human flesh. That, of course, is the very *evangellion* into which Advent and Christmas plunge us.

Furthermore, this is always the eucharistic vision. Not merely a historical memorial, and not a mere connection with an external deity. Rather, in Eucharist we truly participate in the timeless incarnating of the Divine - and are called to wake up⁷ to the fact that we are to become what we consume, the Body of Christ.

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⁶ Luke 17:20b-21

⁷ Mark 13:33,37